Better the Devil You Know

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Better the Devil You Know

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Summary

After the Ripper's recent kill, a nightmare sheds some light on the murders surrounding the BAU. Even as Will feels himself being torn at the seams by horror, he knows he can rely on Hannibal to keep him grounded.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Will slept poorly. Tossing and turning throughout the night, he woke up from a brutal yet strangely enlightening dream at four thirty. So many murders had flashed through his brain, old ones and new. Unconscious, he made connections. He woke wet with sweat and breathing hard. He nudged Hannibal, who made a vague questioning noise. “There’s no copycat killer — it’s all the Chesapeake Ripper. And there are so many murders that we didn’t see.” He got out of bed and wiped himself off with a discarded t-shirt and pulled on jeans. “Go back to sleep.” He kissed the edge of Hannibal’s mouth. “Sorry about this.”

“Shouldn’t you breathe?” asked Hannibal.

“No, if I have to get out of bed too soon to breathe, I can do a breath counting one with my eyes open. I’m sorry, Hannibal. I’ll make it up to you.”

“You have nothing for which to apologize,” Hannibal promised. “Shall I bring you breakfast?”

Will kissed Hannibal’s shoulder and said, “No, I’m not going to be able to eat. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” said Hannibal. He stroked Will’s thigh. “I’ll feed the dogs and let them out. I’m sure Jack will call me to the lab later.”

“Go back to sleep,” said Will.

He pulled on a flannel shirt and, in the living room pulled on flip-flops not wanting to get socks out of his drawer and make more noise in the bedroom. He walked over the fields, counting breathes, in and out. It was too dark but he just kept breathing and focusing on the dew on his feet and the hems of his jeans. He went through security where the guard looked at him with bored eyes. In the lab, he was surprised that some of the lights were still on. The others, minus Jack, were all there.

“Will, what are you doing here?” asked Jimmy.

“Why are you here?” he replied.

“Haven’t finished everything in the body,” said Beverly. “That’s a great outfit,” she looked him up and down with an amused smile.

“I thought the lab would be empty,” he said. He went to the different boards and took pictures off them, solved murders and unresolved. He pulled out an empty board, put it up on an empty space on the wall, and started writing, pinning the pictures on as he went.

“Will, what are you doing?” asked Beverly, coming to look at his board.

“I had a nightmare,” he replied, not stopping.

“You have something in your hair,” she said and she reached out.

He started back, avoiding her hand. “It’s four fifty in the morning; please don’t make me cope with physical contact. I’ve had three hours of nightmare-ridden sleep. I woke up drenched in sweat. I expected to walk into a nice, quiet, empty lab. I was going to turn on all the lights and be surrounded by sterile white and shiny metal — all reflecting light back at me. It was bad enough walking in and seeing three people. Don’t make it worse. Please, don’t touch me. I can’t cope. Is it paint primer?” He knew there was an edge to his voice, the whine it took on when he was steps away from crying. His pulse was too fast, he was sweaty and he could cry from pure stress if he was pushed even the slightest bit too far.

In an instant sign of backing off, Beverly put her hands up in surrender. “Sorry, Will. I wasn’t thinking. I know you hate touch and I’m sorry. It could be primer.”

Will ran his fingers through his hair and found the hard bit. He pulled it out and confirmed it, “Paint primer. I thought I got it all in the shower.”

“Why do you have primer in your hair?” asked Jimmy as Beverly went to the wall and switched the last two light switches that hadn’t been on. It was too bright, he knew that. They rarely lit them all while not examining a body’s tiniest details. But, despite the fact that it was almost bright enough to hurt his eyes, Will felt a tiny bit better.

“Because the Ripper scares me and I wasn’t going to sleep. Hannibal had bought the paint for my house. That was his gift. When he left here he came to me. We primed the upstairs together.” He looked at his board. They all knew about his neurological condition now. He didn’t need to try and force himself to be nice or sociable. They might not like his actions but they wouldn’t make it harder for him to function. Thinking that, he and said, “Can you all focus on your thing, please? I’ll focus on my thing and then I’ll go. You can talk if you like, but don’t include me, please. I’m not sure how I’m going to get through today. Just ignore me; I don’t want to be included. I don’t want social interaction on top of the Ripper.” They all nodded and he went back to his work.

Feeling like a weight was off his shoulders, he counted his pulse. It was something Mort had told him to do when stressed out, surrounded by too many people and in a place safe enough to require no attention. His pulse was far too high, had been ever since he woke up. It had calmed for the few minutes walking to work but, upon finding people in the lab, it had gone up. After Beverly’s attempt to touch him it was going one hundred and ten beats instead of seventy-five where it usually sat. He focused on that one sound and his work and the rest of the lab faded into the background. His pulse stayed too high as he focused on the pictures and kept the Ripper at the forefront of his mind. After 9942 beats, or roughly an hour and a half, he put his marker down, studied his board and breathed out slowly. Beverly was talking about decomp time and he waited until she finished to turn around and say, “Tell Jack I’ll come back at three to discuss it. Tell him that if he pulls me out of class I won’t make it through the day. I need my classes today… I’m going to go home, shower, pet my dogs and brush my teeth.”

The board had so many notes he didn’t think it needed an explanation. It was all linked by proof and patterns. None of it was fancy or supposition. Jack frequently thought Will worked off of ideas and feelings but, really, Will worked off of cold facts. His brain just connected them through a complicated web of fear and broad knowledge that most people, including

Jack, didn't understand. The board showed nothing but true, documented data. The people on the board were all killed by the Ripper. Cassie Boyle, Marissa Schurr, Donald Sutcliffe and Georgia Madchen were hitherto unknown victims. At the bottom he wrote, "He created an alter ego, moved away from his patterns, to mess with us. This is a game. We always knew his kills weren't compulsion. He likes his pattern, it's not necessary to him — just enjoyable. He isn't crazy, he's evil, and his targeting the BAU has been going on since Miriam Lass' disappearance. He knows everyone in this lab and he's playing a game. Be careful and watch your backs: we're all possible targets."

It was all there but that didn't matter, Jack was always going to want to hear it from him. He walked home, doing a calming breathing treatment and went inside he showered, brushed his teeth and made coffee, letting the dogs out. He'd gotten his pulse down to ninety-seven. It wasn't good but it wasn't as bad. He dressed himself as Hannibal showered. He played with the dogs, trying to relax. Hannibal came out to the porch and watched Will playing with the dogs while drinking his coffee.

"Do you want to talk about it, Will?" asked Hannibal.

"No," said Will. "I don't want it tainting my house. This is the safe place. I don't want to talk about the copycat or the Ripper, or how they're one in the same, not here. I thought… I thought we hadn't seen the Ripper for a while… he's been lurking the whole time. He's so close, Hannibal, it terrifies me that he's so close."

"Would you like voodoo pasta tonight?"

Will shook his head and went into the kitchen, the dogs followed him. At the counter, he flicked through the recipe card box his dad had given to him when he left for college and pulled out one card. "This would be good. If you speak to Daddy, don't tell him. It will worry him more than voodoo pasta."

Hannibal glanced at the recipe for jambalaya and said, "I'm sorry it's so hard on you."

Will said nothing just nodded and drained his coffee. From the fridge, he grabbed the pitcher of lemonade ice tea and poured himself a thermos. He kissed Hannibal gently, exploring his mouth with slow desperation. He wanted to remember what good felt like. Hannibal pulled him close and held him carefully. Will let himself be held close, breathing in the scent of the other man for ten minutes, standing still in his kitchen in the tight embrace. They didn't speak, just held each other. He got his pulse down to ninety-one, breathing in the best man he knew. Finally, he said, "I have an early class and you have to get to Baltimore."

"Are you sure you can handle it today?" asked Hannibal.

"I have to," said Will. "I can't let a murderer ruin my life." He kissed Hannibal, a peck to stop himself from pulling the man back to bed. "Go; thank you for last night. Thank you, preemptively, for tonight. I'll be a mess. I promised to go back at three to explain the board I just wrote."

"Then I'll come at three if Jack asks me to come at all: I'll be there with you."

“Thank you, Hannibal.”

He walked back to school, through security to his nice little office and wrote notes in his book for Mort, what he’d used, which ones helped, rated and ranked them. He got his pulse down to eighty-seven before going to his class. It was probably the best he’d be this side of midnight. He knew it wasn’t good for his heart, it was unhealthy in the long run. There was nothing he could do about it outside of a drug. He went to class and talked, and talked, and talked, showing slide after slide. He ended ten minutes early and he said, “I’m sorry for my speed today. As you will have heard by now, the Chesapeake Ripper has struck again and my mind is on him. For next week, I want you to study the handout I gave you. We’re going to have a quiz. It will have pictures: name that ligature mark.”

They left and he had a full half hour before his next class. He sat down in his chair and did the exercise meant for his classroom. His pulse was too fast but he was safe. He was Will Graham, he was awake and he was in Quantico, one of the safest buildings in the country. He tried to picture his lungs and his breathing. He told himself he was responsible only for his own actions and culpable only to the law and his own conscience. He told himself that this was his body, he lived in it and it belonged only to him. He told himself that he was Will Graham and his life was his own. He tried to believe that wasn’t a murderer and he wasn’t a victim. He was safe, his dogs were safe and he inhabited his own body, his own space. Unlike the last time it didn’t do a damn thing to calm him. He took out his journal for Mort and wrote more notes.

A student came in and Will went to the bathroom, just to get away, he took his briefcase with him to take a leak and washed his hands very slowly. He went to the vending machines, got a bad cup of coffee and went back to class. His second class was the same as his first, he knew he was talking too fast, he knew it but he couldn’t stop. Half way through, Alana came and sat in the back of the class. He wanted to slow down but couldn’t. When the class ended, twelve minutes before it should have, he apologized the same as last time. He didn’t head to his office, he sat at his desk. Alana Bloom came to him and said, “Y’wanna head to your office?”

He shook his head, “You want to talk, my office isn’t big enough to talk. It’s too small.”

“You okay, Will?”

“Georgia Madchen, Marissa Schurr, Cassie Boyle and Donald Sutcliffe were all killed by the Ripper,” said Will. “Georgia was a sick, nice girl who hid under my bed because she was scared. Marissa was Abigail’s best friend. Dr. Sutcliffe tried to help me and Cassie Boyle’s body was treated as an object lesson to teach me about Hobbs and fear. Nothing is okay, Alana. There is no copycat killer, he’s just the Ripper and the Ripper has us in the crosshairs. My pulse is twelve seconds faster than it should be. That’s the lowest it’s been since four thirty.”

“Will, that’s panic attack level and unhealthy. You need to calm down.”

Breathing out slowly he said, “Alana, a reprimand for my stress shockingly doesn’t actually help me relax.” He knew his tone was sharp and knew what social norms told him to do, he said, “I’m sorry. I know you’re trying to help. I’m sorry.” He wasn’t really sorry, he knew it

was what he was supposed to say. He was too agitated to feel anything other than irritation at the fact that there was a second person breathing the air in his classroom.

“Will,” she said slowly.

“I’m not fit for any kind of friendly conversation today, Alana. It’s my own fight or flight: fight or cry. I don’t want to fight or cry so it might be best if we just see each other tomorrow. I’m sorry, Alana, I can’t be… I need to have a day that’s silent of all conversation to get through it and then Hannibal is making me jambalaya. I just need to keep it together for a few hours.”

She nodded. “What if I got us a couple of everything bagels with cream cheese, and lox and we just sit silently, in here or in your office, and eat? Does that sound good or bad? I have a book.”

Will thought, “Sounds good.”

“I’ll meet you. Here or your office?”

“My office has a lock,” said Will.

“Meet you there,” said Alana.

He packed his briefcase and went to his office where he breathed very slowly until there was a knock at the door. “Who is it?”

“Me, Alana,” she responded and he unlocked the door, opening it for her.

“I’m sorry,” said Will.

“You don’t need to apologize, Will,” she said. “I’m here without an agenda, I just wanted to be your friend. If this is how you are today, then this is how you are — that’s okay.” He nodded and accepted the bagel from her. He opened his mouth but found he had no words. Instead he poured them each a glass of lemonade ice tea. “Thank you, Will.” They ate in silence, occasionally, Will would try to find the words but then give up. After a little while Alana said, “Do you want me to talk to you, make some background noise or would you rather silence?”

He thought about it and finally said, “Talk, keep me company. I can’t talk but maybe… Maybe it’ll help me get out of my head.”

“I went on a date last night: complete disaster,” she smiled as she said it. And he nodded. He listened as he chewed. The guy was so boring that Alana had wanted to run away. As she told him about the guy’s obsession with NASCAR, Will felt himself laugh, even though he felt like he was outside himself. His pulse dropped three more beats. After a while, she said, “I better go. I have a patient.”

“Thank you, Alana, this was nice.”

“You’re not alone, Will, not this time.”

“My pulse is only nine beats too fast now,” he said.

She nodded, “That’s good. I’m glad.”

After she left he breathed again, focusing, before his next two classes. His first of the afternoon was only seven minutes too short. His second, and final, class of the day was thirteen. Halfway through he’d started thinking about going to the BAU. He didn’t want to, it filled him with mounting dread. What he really wanted was too go home, search every nook and cranny for monsters, and just pet his dogs. He could decide if he wanted nothing but the sound of the breeze and animals in the house or if he wanted music. Both options had their good qualities.

Inside he saw Jack was in his office. He went in and shut the door, leaning against it, staying as far away as possible, Will said, “Do you need me to explain the board at all?”

“Yes,” he said. “I want you to run us through it.”

The man opened his mouth to go on but Will said, “Fine, but I need you to speak softly and evenly. I know you get frustrated and then you shout. You’re not allowed to shout at me. If you do I walk out and if the FBI wants to fire me for it, they can. You cannot shout at me.” The man nodded and Will went out to the main lab just as Hannibal walked in. Hannibal gave him a small smile. Will looked at the board and said, “There’s no copycat killer. These are the Ripper. They all resemble another killer’s work but he has heightened it to an art form — made symphonies of their off-key humming. The brutality we usually see so controlled in the Ripper’s kills was unleashed on these people. It was a new outlet for him. Sutcliff had his face cut off; Georgia burned to death. There was nothing subtle. And all of this is connected back to us. The first victim, Cassie Boyle, was my first case here, as Jack’s latest protégé,” he felt the bitterness in his mouth as he spoke.

“Just like Miriam Lass, I shouldn’t be in the field. She was a student; I’m mentally unstable. The Ripper knows that. The FBI is a gossipy place. Either the killer works here, they have a gossipy friend, or they’re paying someone. This is internal messaging. And it’s about you, Jack. He holds you in contempt and his message is, ‘You call me a monster; I’m not the one endangering innocent people with a veneer of righteousness.’” Jack opened his mouth and Will said, “No, Jack, no comments until the end. He’s the one sending the massage: don’t shout at the messenger. You put me under too much stress all the time: my psyche can’t handle anymore today. If you shout, I will leave."

Staring Jack down, he couldn’t force eye contact, his heart was racing and it might push him over the edge to vomiting. After a few silent moments he said, “He took Miriam Lass, a girl who should have been learning in a classroom; he gave me a gory horrible picture. Practically half the FBI knows I’m not a field agent because I’m not emotionally competent. You took a scared teacher out of a safe classroom and the Ripper dumped a bucket of blood over my head. That suggests the leak or the killer works in either personnel or the BAU, which narrows it down to a couple of thousand.” It was odd, to have a real number yet have it mean nothing.

Pointing at the picture of Marissa alive he said, “As for Marissa Schurr… that was his idea of a joke.” He didn’t look at the picture of her, strung up like a trophy on a wall. He didn’t like

knowing it had happened to Abigail's friend. "He framed Nicolas Boyle, he threw us off his scent. The Ripper has never left any evidence of himself, but he could leave the DNA of someone else. It was no coincidence that he killed Marissa: she was picked to hurt Abigail; she was never random. She was Abigail's best friend. If Hobbs couldn't kill his daughter well, the Ripper could hurt her. It was his idea of a mark of respect: he didn't steal Hobbs' murder of his daughter; he just stabbed her in her heart. Very few people knew of that connection but we let her onto the Hobbs property after she said she wanted to hug her best friend: the FBI field team, the records lab and the BAU knew she mattered. She was Abigail's last link to her happy life.
"Which brings us to our next kill, separated so completely from the other's we've always been confused by its connection: Donald Sutcliffe. We've always known my neurologist wasn't killed by Georgia Madchen. Yes, her DNA was on the weapon but she'd been following me for days at that point. Her DNA at the scene means as much as Nicolas Boyle's on Marissa. It was like Georgia's kill but she wasn't a serial killer and she tried to cut off a mask made of flesh not… not what happed to him. His was more brutal than what she did. His was brutality elevated to art. The Ripper has always loved his theatrics. The message was that no one's safe. I looked for medical help: he took it away." He swallowed hard. "I had no emotions about him, but he was my doctor: he was trying to help me and the Ripper murdered him."

"And, finally, Georgia." Again, instead of looking at her burned corpse, he looked at the picture her mother had given them. She was a really pretty girl when she smiled. "The last time I saw Georgia, when I visited in the hospital just before finally collapsing myself, she told me that she remembered a man in Sutcliff's office. She thought it was me, she couldn't see the killer's face — yet — but I think we can rule me out as I was inside an MRI at the time. She was a nice girl; she needed help so, even though I was terrified by the girl under my bed, I visited her. She asked me if she looked alive. I told her she looked pretty. She was so pleased with the compliment. I think it had been a long, long time since anyone said she looked anything but broken. He made sure she didn't leave a pretty corpse. Her records were open to anyone in the FBI, we paid for her care, we were working on cutting a deal. Her family let us see everything — even what she said to her shrink. They wanted us to know she was sick not evil. The Ripper found out the fog was lifting from her mind and he took her out: set her on fire. It was possibly the most grisly yet clean kill of all. He gave her a comb and she used it. His hands never got dirty as a sweet, sick girl who was finally getting out of hell, burned alive." He shook his head, "Look at the knife work, the elegance: it's the same person. It's the Ripper."

He looked away from the board at a spot over Jack's left ear. "Do have any questions about the science I have put on this board? Not personal things, not blame, not emotion: just the board." Jack shook his head. "I'm leaving. Don't call me in for anything short of apocalyptic." Picking up his briefcase he headed toward the door.

"Will, I'll be at the house in less than an hour," promised Hannibal.

Will didn't care about the audience, his pulse was high, his skin drenched in sweat and his face was wet with tears that were noiseless and not caused by sadness. Not caring about anyone's opinions, seeking only something nice, some comfort, he spoke with his back to the room still, "I love you, Hannibal."

“I love you too, Will, and I’ll be there in less than an hour, to cook you dinner, play with the dogs and give the upstairs rooms their first coat of paint,” it was a promise that warmed him just a little bit and he didn’t say anything, he just headed home.

Home would have dogs, good music, nice coffee. Soon home would have his boyfriend, who loved him. It would be safe and quiet. And the Ripper, in all his guises, was not welcome there.

End Notes

I am so sorry. Please leave kudos and comments if you liked it... I am so sorry.

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